

Johns, B.G.

How the blind dream.

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HOW THE BLIND DREAM.

"Blessed be the man who invented Sleep; for it wrappeth one up like a garment." So says honest Sancho Panza; and his words have grown into a dainty proverb, to which a wiser and greater than Sancho* has added, "and when he is thus wrapped up, then befalleth him the greater mystery of dreams." It is hard to say which is the greater mystery of the two; but both are mysteries, and it is impossible to deal with one apart from the other, for, though all men sleep, there is no proof whatever that any sleep is absolutely free from dreaming. On the contrary, one of the acutest thinkers of modern times † boldly affirms that there is no such thing as dreamless sleep; though in *profound* sleep, indeed, there is no evidence that we think at all. When exhausted by fatigue or acute pain, we may lie motionless for hours, without the smallest after-recollection that a single idea has passed through our minds; the periods of sleeping and waking appearing to be consecutive instants of time.‡ In this state it is as if every operation of the mind were entirely suspended. And thus we may dream in sleep without recollecting the slightest feature of our dreams when we start up and gradually become awake. It is almost like coming back from an interval of death.§ Then we feel the truth of the words—

How wonderful is Death,
Death, and his brother Sleep.||

But, like other mysteries of our being, this one again and again befalls us until, by constant habit, it becomes so familiar that we are hardly conscious of what happens, and almost forget the wonder of it. From day to day, and night by night, all our life through, we think and speak, we see, hear, and breathe, with little or no thought of all the varied powers and machinery by which these operations are carried on, *unceasingly*, through every hour of existence. If a man slept but once in six months, the event would

* Browne's *Religio Medici*.

† Sir W. Hamilton.

‡ Sydney Smith's *Moral Philosophy*.


§ Sic sine vitâ

Vivere quam suave est; sic sine morte mori.

|| *Queen Mab*.

Nat. Rev. May 1885





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fill him with simple amazement. He sleeps every night of his life, and the wonder passes unheeded. In fact, we all of us spend at least one-fourth of our time in sleeping and dreaming,* and the whole matter passes as one of little moment. And yet the thing is a mystery, and a part of our very being. Well for us, perhaps, that we fall into it so unconsciously, and waken out of it with as little consciousness. Well for us that we cannot *see* the machinery at work—the vital machinery of life—or the wheels might cease to move, and the happy oblivion of quiet never fall on the weary brain, or of rest upon the wearied body.

When, therefore, the great master of all pictures in the land of Sleep and Dreams says—

To die, to sleep,
To sleep! perchance to dream; aye, there 's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come!

we know full well what he means.

He is standing in the border-land, at the edge of the great mystery, and gazing with keen eyes into the unseen, the unknown, in all its beauty, wonder, and peace; the foreshadow of which falls on the whole race of man, as often as sunset dies along the hills, day is over, and moon and stars rise to govern the night.

We agree, then, with honest Sancho in blessing the man who invented sleep, without which even the physical world † could not maintain its present life of beauty, light, and strength for a single moon, and without which mortal men could not exist; and turn to our more immediate subject—the mystery of dreams. It is with slowly gradual and soft enchantment that sleep invades a man. Little by little his senses grow dim and faint; ‡ the powers of sight, hearing, touch, imperceptibly sink away further and further from their normal state into abeyance, as if blotted out, dead, gone from him. Then, as these die out and become more and more remote, after an interval which he cannot measure he passes, happily or unhappily, into Dreamland, and there comes upon him a mighty change. In peace he still lies, apparently unconscious, powerless, motionless; and, but for the faint ebb and flow of breath, as if dead, whereas he is more alive than ever. His senses have, in fact, suddenly started up into keen, swift life. For him the laws of time and space have been annihilated. He seems, indeed, as we look, to be *here* before our very eyes; but he may be a thousand miles away. It is not 1885 with him at all, but ten, twenty, fifty years back. He may be living over again some single

* If a man live to be eighty, he will have passed twenty years of his life in unconsciousness.

† Trees and plants breathe, and even sleep; giving off through the leaves oxygen both by night and day, but far *less* during the hours of darkness.

‡ His pulse falls by about one-fifth.—Sully's *Illusions*.

brief hour or few moments of the past, too full of fierce light, crowned with too deep a rapture of joy or passion of sorrow to endure, or to come to him ever again but in a dream. He may be saying good-bye for the last time to one who was dearer to him than life itself, but has passed into the Silent Land, into the dust of death; but she is with him now once again, her face as full of light and grace and sunshine as in the days of long ago!

Or he is at St. George's Hospital cutting off a man's leg, which, in truth, was severed from its owner by someone else a week ago, after being crushed under the wheel of a Chelsea omnibus. But the whole scene is before him; the quiet, clear, determined eyes of the operating surgeon, the steady hand, the keen knife; the crowd of students, all hushed, watching the famous man do his work; the nurse, her dainty cap, her dexterous fingers; the spirt of crimson blood, the white bandages. Or he is face to face once more with that intolerable examiner who, long years ago, after torturing him for twenty minutes over a tough morsel of Pauline Greek, told him he "*might go*," without saying whether he had passed or not. He may be blowing bubbles with his youngest son in the summer-house; or flirting with some beloved "*Adelina*" by the light of a treacherous moon, in the old, well-known College Gardens, under the trees in Addison's Walk; or on the deck of a P. and O. steamer. He may be in a crowd on Camberwell Green, or in solitude at the North Pole. But, wherever he is, or whatever he may be doing, the persons, the places, the *objects* of his dream, are presented to him with a clearness and in a vivid light beyond all ordinary waking vision.

[Between the completion of that last paragraph and the beginning of the next, it so chances that I, the writer of this paper, have had a short dream which illustrates and enforces this very exact point. Thus it befell me.]

After reading a story of Christie Murray's* for half an hour, as the clock struck twelve I closed my eyes, slowly fell asleep, and dreamed. All at once I was in the midst of a vast crowd, and suddenly face to face with a famous, well-known noble Lord, far better known at Exeter Hall than I am; and a single glance told me who he was. After a few moments, on his beckoning to me to follow him, I instantly obeyed, and presently made my way up to the platform in that dreary hall, facing a vast assemblage of listening thousands, who watched with eager eyes, and still more eager ears, the speaker who addressed them. She was a woman of about forty, dressed in a long flowing robe of dark blue serge, with ornaments of tawny gold at the neck. Her face, full of dignity,

* Oddly enough, it was *Joseph's Coat*, a brilliant and amusing romance that has no possible connection with dreaming.

passion, and beauty, was like that of the elder Napoleon; and as I took my place by the chairman's side, she turned on me a pair of dazzling eyes that pierced to my very heart. Bowing to me, she continued her fiery address on the horrors of an African slave-ship, and for nearly an hour held her audience spell-bound in words of tender and sparkling eloquence such as I had never before heard. When she ceased there was a silence; and then rose a wild tumult of applause that shook the whole building, and made every heart tingle with new life. As this died away, to my utter amazement new cries arose, and I heard my own name repeated again and again from all parts of the Hall. Once more the magician turned upon me those dazzling eyes, and at their imperious command I instantly rose to speak. Plunging boldly into my subject, as if I had known it all my life instead of but an hour, I rose into a sudden burst of daring oratory that seemed to carry all before it. Never for a single moment did I once falter. Ideas, images, facts, crowded on my glowing brain faster than words could give them utterance. Again and again the people broke out into vehement cries of applause, again and again grew hushed into listening silence, and still I went on and on with untiring and unbroken spirit, until at last I knew that my work was done, and I ended as suddenly as I had begun.

Once more the roof re-echoed with shouts of approval, and loud cries of my name; and then, in an instant, the whole scene vanished, and with a start I awoke from my dream as the bell of a neighbouring tower sounded one quarter past midnight. At the very utmost I had not been asleep more than five minutes, into which had been crowded long hours of vivid life. The impassioned burning eloquence of the woman I have never heard surpassed; the sea of upturned listening faces, and the weird glamour of her eyes I can never forget.

* * * *

And now, once more awake and composed, and in my sober senses, as I recall that strange interlude, it is what I *saw* rather than what I *heard* that stamps the whole vision with reality. My own flowing oration is already a mere *vox et præterea nihil*; and even the impassioned address of the magician little more than a confused medley of broken recollections.

Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem
Quam quæ sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus.*

In what a man sees, therefore, lies the essence of his dream, however wild or strange the vision, even

Tho' many monstrous forms in dreams we see,
Which neither were, nor are, nor e'er can be.†

* Hor. Ars. Poet, 180.

† Dryden.

Turn, now, to one or two better-known dreams, and see how far they corroborate this view. Take, first, that one, perhaps the most famous on record, of the lonely wanderer who, as night fell, took of the stones of the earth and put them for his pillow, and lay down to sleep. And he dreamed, *and behold! a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold! the host of angels ascended and descended upon it; and above it stood He whom angels obey.*

The reader will doubtless recall Rembrandt's wondrous picture* of the wanderer's dream, with all its solemn blending of darkness and light, the host of ascending and descending spirits along the pathway of glory from the throne on high to the stones where the sleeper lay entranced. But if we cut out from it what the dreamer *saw*, and what Rembrandt painted, the result is a mere *caput mortuum*, a thing of vague shadowy words.

Or, take that other equally famous dream in the harvest field, dim and far off among the summer days of Canaan three thousand years ago. "Behold!" says the dreamer, "we were binding sheaves together, *and lo! my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold! your sheaves stood round about, and did obeisance,*" &c. &c.

Take from this what the dreamer *saw*, the wide sweep of yellow harvest-field, the golden sheaves, the bowing ears of corn, and the vital power of the scene is gone.

Or, turn now to a picture of a totally different kind and age, and the witness will still be the same. "Methought," says Clarence†—

Methought that I had broken from the tower,
And was embarked to cross to Burgundy,
And in my company my brother Glo'ster,
Who from my cabin tempted me to walk
Upon the hatches; hence we looked tow'd England.

As we paced along

Upon the giddy footing of the hatches,
Methought that Glo'ster stumbled, and in falling
Struck me, that thought to stay him, overboard
Into the tumbling billows of the main.
O Lord! methought what pain it was to drown,
What dreadful noise of water in mine ears!
What sights of ugly death within mine eyes!
Methought I saw a thousand fearful wrecks,
A thousand men that fishes gnawed upon!
Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
All scattered at the bottom of the sea.

No more vivid picture of a dream exists in written words; yet what becomes of the picture if we take out of it "the giddy footing," the fall into the yeast of "tumbling billows," "the sights of ugly death," "the thousand wrecks," the fish, the stones, pearly

* In the Dulwich Gallery.

† *Richard III.*

gems, and gold that lie scattered over the stormy depths below? Hence it arises from these very points which the eye seizes on with instant rapidity that

Our dreams in their development have breath,
And tears, and tortures, and the touch of joy.*

Hence springs their reality, their supreme sway over the dreamer. When awake he is in a world common alike to all; asleep, he is in a special world of his own; and that very sense which seems most dormant assumes a new and vivid power that masters his inmost being. The unknown figure that, with uplifted hand, beckons him to follow, is instantly obeyed, lead where it will, with hungrier eyes than ever the miser looks on, and recounts, his own secret hoard, or gazes in rapture at the untold wealth of a vision. The lover beholds the face of his mistress

Clad with the beauty of a thousand isles,

and crowned with a lustre that seems immortal, or with the pallor of death upon it that freezes his very marrow. To the murderer, in his broken sleep, comes back in hideous reality the very image of the victim whom he once struck down and slew, hidden in the grave all these long years, but now once more instinct with life. Does the hapless Tyrian Queen mourn over her lost partner, and dream of the bitter past, it is still to the keen sense of vision that the witness appeals,—

Ipsa sed in somnis inhumati venit imago,
Conjugis; ora modis attolleus pallida miris.†

Dives in his palace beholds new tables spread with a thousand dainties of yet rarer and rarer excellence; *Lazarus* at the gate sees the very dogs that licked his sores. Even though *the thing seen* be of imperfect outline, as with the patriarch of old, still not a whit of its power is gone. "It stood still," says Job, "*but I could not discern the form thereof, an image passed before mine eyes; there was silence,*" &c. &c. The horror all remained, keen and intense, as if he had seen the *whole* shape with a thousand eyes. In such a case doubly true becomes the strange paradox, "*πλεῖον ἤμιν παντός.*"

II.—What, then, shall the dream of the blind man be like, into which neither light, nor colour, nor expression, nor outline can possibly find entrance? But, before we can deal with this point, the ground must be somewhat cleared by defining what is meant by "*the blind.*"‡

"No man becomes blind," says the proverb, "*by merely shutting his eyes; nor does a fool always see by opening them.*" Yet most people, when reasoning about "*the blind,*" are apt to judge of them

* Byron.

† Virgil, i.

‡ The blind, of whom there are 30,000 in England.

as simply having their eyes shut, while we have ours open. This is but a hundredth part of the difference. Let us illustrate the case from life. Mr. Octavius Smith has for a neighbour Mr. Cassio Brown. Smith caught a cold in his eyes when but a few years old and became totally blind; while Brown's eyes are still, at forty, as keen as a hawk's. It is a winter evening, and Mr. B. sits reading in his library. He has mastered a chapter of metaphysics, and now shuts his eyes to ponder on the final and toughest morsel. As his bodily eyes close, his mental eyes open; and the very objects at which he but just now gazed re-appear almost as they fade. He can, *if he will*, still see the printed page; opposite, over the fire-place, still appears to hang that incomparable likeness of himself as President of the Pedlington Archery Club; he can still *see* the ruddy fire; and the shadow on the wall still seems to flicker in the uncertain light, on whichever of these points his thoughts chance to dwell,—metaphysics, archery, his own noble mien as “Sagittarius,” the price of coals, or the theory of shadows,—of that very one may his eyes, though closely shut, still behold a visible symbol. “*Non cernenda sibi lumina clausa vident.*”

But suppose Mr. S. under precisely similar circumstances, save that he is blind. He, too, reads, and is given to meditation; he leans back in his chair, and thinks. He has been blind these forty years. He cannot, with any approach to accuracy, recall the outline of a single object of sight which greets the traveller through little Pedlington, though he may, perhaps, grope his way through the village. He knows where to turn off the main road to the stile across the fields; and precisely where the pump stands outside the blacksmith's forge; he can even *run* without risk through the passage of the paternal mansion. He is fairly acquainted with the main features of the room in which he sits, can find almost any volume that is wanted, and is aware of the portrait over the fire-place. But when he leans back to muse on that last tough chapter, no sudden change takes place further than this: that a moment ago he was reading—now he is thinking of what he read. But no visions of shadow on the wall, of printed type or page, of portrait, or of archery are ready to spring up at a moment's notice, to be scanned or dismissed at will. Blank night shuts him in on all sides as he reads; it still shuts him in when he has ceased to read. Of the very light, in which the rest of the world live, he can form no conception, but from its genial warmth as the sun greets him in his morning walk, or dies along the avenue at eventide. If his thoughts stray for a moment from metaphysics to the crackling *sound* of the fire, his mental vision may form what idea it can of blazing coals, but it has no help in the conception from aught of visible, external, things. “*The world of the blind,*” says

Prescott,* "*is circumscribed by the little circle which they can span with their own arms. All beyond has for them no real existence.*"†

All descriptions, therefore, of the starry heavens at night, the golden dawn, the setting sun, the boundless sea, the arched canopy of the sky, convey to them but a dim and vague idea of distance and space—not even a faint conception of the glorious spectacle that delights their fellow-men.‡ And, as it is with the daily life of the man born blind, so must it be with him in the land of dreams. Henderson, the witch-finder, indeed, *fancied* he saw the spirit of a slumbering cat pass from her in pursuit of a *visionary* mouse; but the cat actually saw what she pursued. Thomas Blake, the half-crazy artist, professed to see sitters for his pictures as well absent as when present. To some such imperfect degree of mental vision the blind man may possibly aspire. But to no such noble, living vision as Jacob's can he by any possibility attain. There can be for him no arched canopy of heaven, no angelic host coming and going by the ray of infinite glory which pierced the clouds, no glimpse of the Eternal One. No face can rise from the grave to smite him with terror; no image of beauty to gladden his heart with a glimpse of the lovely maiden far away; no one shape of splendour, grace, or rapture out of the cloudy past; no outline of mystery, passion, joy, pain, hope, or fear to appeal to his eager brain with the swift power of a living presence. To him can come no *vision* of foaming billows, nor perilous wreck, nor pearly gems scattered along the floor of the deep, nor clouds driven across the storm-rent sky. Within him, all round him, reigns night supreme and unchanging.§

To him, then, can come no such dreams as befall the race of seeing men. Never can there happen to him what happened in 1879 to the well-known divine and antiquary, Dr. Jessop, at Mannington Hall.|| "I had been," he says, "at work in the library, and was beginning to think my labour drawing to a close, when, as I was actually writing, I saw a large white hand within a foot of

* The famous blind historian (*Essays*, p. 47).

† Always excepting the infinite domain of music, in which the blind man may be a master: such as Stanley, the organist of St. Andrew's, Holborn, to whom Handel himself was often a delighted listener.

‡ Nor must it be urged, in reply to this, that Milton dreamed, and painted his wondrous vision in a well-known sonnet; for he did not become blind *until he had reached middle age*, and was educated and equipped for the work of life. And the same remark may apply, *longo intervallo*, to Professor and Postmaster-General Fawcett, and other such men, who, losing their sight in manhood, yet retain to the last some distinct impression of the visible world.

§ Milton, who only knew half its bitterness, calls it—

To live half-dead a living death.

|| Lord Orford's seat in Norfolk.

my elbow. Turning my head, there sat the figure of a somewhat stout man, with his back to the fire, bending slightly over the table, and examining the pile of books that I had been at work upon." (He then minutely describes his face, features, dress, and look.) "I gazed at my visitor for some seconds, and was perfectly sure that he was not a reality. I felt eager to make a sketch of him, but, as I moved my left hand to take up a book, he vanished. I set to work once more, steadily for five minutes, and had actually got to my last words, when the figure appeared again exactly as before. I was framing a sentence to address to him, when I discovered that I did not dare to speak. There he sat, there sat I. I shut the book and threw it on the table, and at the noise the figure again vanished. After a while, I blew out the four wax candles, and marched off to bed, where I slept the sleep of the just, or the guilty—I know not which—but I slept soundly."*

But the blind man will be far better off if he go down to Creslow Manor House, Bucks; for the stately lady, in a long silk train, who enters the haunted room there, with a quick and hurried motion, as if engaged in a desperate struggle, together with all her other accessories, *is totally invisible*.

It is clear, then, that whatever comes to him must come by touch or hearing, without a gleam of fancy or imagination. Yet, if questioned, he will tell you that he has just as much imagination as other people, and dreams quite as often as they do. "I often dream," said a blind boy to the present writer. "I dream about people; I dream of my brother; I know he is there, I hear his voice; I am in the places where we used to be before he died." "But how do you know you are in a certain place?" "The impression of the place is with me; I feel I am there; I am sure that I am, sometimes, until I wake. Sometimes I dream that I am walking in the fields; I tread on the grass, I smell the fresh air." "If I dream," said another blind man, "that I am in the great basket-shop (where he worked), I know I am there by the size of the room, the length of it." "But how can you judge as to the size or length of what you cannot see?" "Oh, the sound tells me pretty well. I am in my own old place, where I work." "You sit on your own box, then?" "Yes, I touch it, and if the dream goes on I get my tools out." "When I dreams," said a blind trumper, "*it's just the same as I am now*; I dream of hearing and touching. The last dream I had was about a blind chap that's in prison just now. I went into his wife's house—I knew it was hers by the *sound* of my foot in it, and whether it was clean or dirty. As we sat a-talking I heard a voice at the door,

* *Haunted Homes*, by J. H. Ingram—a very curious book, p. 163.

and I said, 'Bless me, if that ain't John !' But *she* took no notice. 'Halloa,' I said, 'is that you ?' And *I took him* by the sleeve ; it was his shirt-sleeve I felt, and I was half afraid of him, and surprised he was *out* weeks before his time. Then (in my dream) I dreamt that he tried to frighten me, and make believe he was a ghost, by *pushing me down sideways*," &c. &c. ; "after that I waked, and heard no more."

Here, again, even in his sleep as when awake, the sense of touch is the blind man's chief agent, motive power, and detective ; and his so-called dream is but a hard, bare, and indistinct fragment of every-day life. It is not to him, as to the rest of the world, that in dreams the senses wake up to keener, swifter intelligence ; to us, though fleeting shadows, they are *μυμήματα ζωῆς*, dividing, yet joining, the separate stages of life ; but to him a mere string of more or less vague and faint impressions. And this, for the best of reasons,—

Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu.

He has never seen and realized what he saw, and that which his brain cannot convey to him as a definite image he will never see. Hence arises a tendency to scepticism, that surely leads him, by slow degrees, to doubt the existence of things which he cannot touch, as in the case of Nicholas Saunderson, one of the most gifted and intellectual blind men that ever lived,* who, at the first University in the world, once lectured on the solar spectrum and the laws of light. "If," said he, as he lay dying, "*you would have me believe in a God I must feel him.*" "Touch, then, your own frame," was the answer, "and find God there in His noble handiwork." "All this," said the dying man, "may be enough for *you*, but it is not so for me ; what relation is there between His handiwork and God ? The world *eternal* ? Time, matter, space, are but a point. God of Newton, *give me light !*" (His last words.)

But light is the one thing which the blind man cannot have. It enters no part of his daily life ; it can illumine no part of the domain of sleep. He dreams in common with the rest of the world ; for though Plutarch and Locke tell us of dreamless men, and Lessing avers that he never dreamed, being mortal, we must and do all of us dream. Beyond all question,—

We are such stuff
As dreams are made of, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.†

Of whatever cast the dreams be—of dread, of beauty, mystery, splendour, joy, terror, infinite reality, or the idle phantasy of a

* Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge (1712) ; a friend of Whiston, Halley, Sir Isaac Newton, &c.

† *Tempest*.

moment—they grow out of the man himself. They spring from the ideas, sensations, habits, acts, passions of his daily life. What infinite spaces of difference may separate the dreams of one human being from another it would be hard to determine. Between Shakspeare and Tupper, Shelley and Fagin the Jew, Rosalind and Caliban, Mozart and the organ-grinder, Macbeth and Jeremy Diddler, must lie a gulf not to be measured by words. Coleridge dreams, and the result is a fragment of immortal melody:—

“A damsel with a dulcimer,
In a vision once I saw,” &c. &c.*

Bill Sykes dreams, and the result is a string of foul words grimmer and blacker than the night which wrapped him in silent shadow. Pilate's wife dreamed, and the issue of her unknown vision yet speaks in a message that has outlived the centuries.

Consciously or unconsciously, sightless or sighted, all dream. The mother dreams of her child far away upon the stormy sea; the musician† of some enchanting melody that, could he write it down, would make him famous for ever; the miser of his hoarded treasure; the lonely maiden of her sweetheart; the soldier, dying by inches in the bloody trench, of a bubbling spring that he drank of when a boy; the patriot, of greater and better things than he has ever yet achieved; and the knave of some villainy even yet more paltry than his latest exploit; the hapless prisoner of being free; and the fool, perchance, of some new and more consummate folly. But we all dream; and the Christian dreaming of Heaven may, after the swift sleep of death, awake to find it an eternal reality.

* *Kubla Khan*, a Dream-Poem, of which he could only recall about fifty lines when awake.

† Tartini's *Sonata du Diable* is said to have been thus inspired

B. G. JOHNS

